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FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE LESS DEVELOPED AREAS

SUMMARY

Agenda Item:H.2. United Kingdom

ORGANIZATION OF STATISTICAL SERVICES

By W.F. SEARLE,
Chief Statistician,
Department of Technical Co-operation,
United Kingdom

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No. 191

H.2.

ORGANISATION OF STATISTICAL SERVICES

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SUMMARY

During the last fifteen years the need for a Department of Statistics was self-evident in many larger developing countries; equally obvious was the inability of a number of very small administrations to justify a specialised statistical service. Between these two extremes were countries in which the timing of a change to a specialised statistical service represented a difficult decision. Occasionally a first step forward could be taken by setting up a Statistical Bureau as distinct from a Department of Statistics.

2. Little can be said about statistical work in very small countries or territories. Visiting experts can undertake ad hoc studies and some forms of statistics can be produced in Departments like the Customs Department. At the other extreme, the special problems arising in very large countries have not been considered.

3. The report of the International Seminar on Statistical Organisation held in Ottawa in 1952 (U.N. Statistical Papers, Series M. No.16) contains a good definition of the functions of a national statistical system but the conclusions are inevitably worded in general terms when the report deals with statistical organisation and the nature and scope of national statistical programmes. So much depends on the circumstances of each country.

4. Since the countries under consideration are all endeavouring to develop at a rapid pace their requirements are related to their need "for an understanding of the economic and social structure" which is very great indeed.

5. This situation is reflected in the place that is given to statistical services in the machinery of government, a common arrangement at the present time being for the Statistics Department to be part of the Ministry that is concerned with economic development and for it to be linked closely with the organisation that has responsibility for development planning. This arrangement may have an influence on priorities for statistical work.

6. A Statistics Department has a special role to play in the relationship between Ministers and Civil Servants in the course of which policies are framed as a balance between short-run and long-run considerations. There is something essentially democratic about Yearbooks and Digests of Statistics.

7. A Director of Statistics is usually faced with a never-ending task of making the best use of the limited means at his disposal. This is a many-sided problem; very important is the need to be in touch with current views on methods and techniques and to adopt or develop those that are simple and direct. Nothing is more important than a sound knowledge of sampling theory and practical skill in applying it.

8. It is never easy for a man who does not know a country well to start a Statistics Department but once one has been created it is a great advantage that many forms of technical assistance are available to the less developed countries.

9. Many Statisticians come into their work as "applied" mathematicians or "applied" economists. It is advisable to direct attention away from the question of all-roundness in the outlook and skill of individual Statisticians and to stress the need for a well-balanced department. If departmental training is well organised, initial differences in education and outlook begin to be less distinctive after a few years and, at the administrative level in the department, should cease to be relevant.

10. A fundamental question is "how centralised should a statistical organisation be?" Since priorities cannot be expressed properly by the allocation of whole units of Statisticians' time centralisation is essential in the earlier years (and much longer in a small country). When the number of Statisticians has expanded, there may well be much to be said for the organisation of statistical units in the larger Ministries or Departments such as those handling agriculture, labour or education. In these circumstances, however, arrangements are necessary so that Statisticians can be moved from one post to another and kept in line for promotion. There is a danger of "isolated groupings".

11. The following problems facing a Director of Statistics have been selected for discussion:-

(a) The importance of a survey organisation (usually working with households as the sampling unit) that can be kept continuously in existence although it may have to be expanded by temporary labour for certain larger surveys.

(b) How to avoid being swamped by large operations like a population census.

(c) When are capital formation or balance of payments estimates or a full set of simplified national accounts ready for circulation that is not very restricted.

(d) How to adjust the balance when a Statistics Department is spending too little (or too much) time on the use and interpretation of statistics for government policy and too much (or too little) on the collection of primary data.

12. However well a Director of Statistics solves these and other problems he is bound, at times, to feel that there is so much needing, yet not receiving, attention. A good and well-balanced statistical service cannot be created quickly.

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